

ATTITUDE PATTERNS OF ROYAL AIR FORCE PERSONNEL IN RELATION TO RETENTION

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ABSTRACT

The 1998 Strategic Defence Review aimed to modernise and reshape the British Armed Forces to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Further to this review, the Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy was developed in conjunction with single service personnel strategies. These strategies concentrate on issues relating to military recruiting, training, sustaining and retaining high calibre personnel. Within the strategic context as it relates to the RAF, this paper concentrates on the retention aspects and, in particular, the military psychologist's contribution to the formulation and implementation of the personnel strategy. It is necessary to analyse the past and understand the present in order to have some hope of predicting the future and thus, to take steps to change it to meet the RAF manning requirements. A systematic approach to retention requires an understanding of where problems occur and why personnel opt to leave the RAF prematurely. The military psychology section of the Command Scientific Support Branch at HQ PTC RAF undertake a number of continuous longitudinal attitude and opinion postal surveys. These studies are briefly described and the information obtained from them is related to influences upon Servicemen and women to remain in or leave the Service. The main groups of factors which appear to have the strongest impact are considered. Finally, the paper suggests further ways in which military psychologists can inform and monitor the effectiveness of uniformed personnel retention strategies.

The 1998 Strategic Defence Review aimed to modernise and reshape the British Armed Forces to meet the challenges of the 21st century. With regard to the personnel aspects, this review stated that;

" To have a modern and effective Armed Force, we must recruit and retain our fair share of the best people the country has to offer."

Consequently, the Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy (AFOPS) was developed in conjunction with 3 single Service personnel strategies namely, the Royal Naval Personnel Strategy, the Army Human Resources Strategy and the RAF Strategy for People. All three concentrate on four main aspects: recruiting, training, sustaining, and retaining military personnel. This paper considers the retention issues.

Retention of personnel has increased in importance for two main reasons. First, it was agreed that the trained strength of the RAF should decrease from 70,000 in 1995 to around 52,000 in 2000 despite a non decreasing commitment to the UK, its dependent Territories, NATO and the UN. Second, training of personnel is both expensive and lengthy. For example, it takes on average four years and costs around four million pounds to train one front-line pilot. If that individual chooses to leave the Service earlier than forecast, the only way to replace him/her is to recruit and train another person. It is not possible to recruit qualified, experienced military pilots from the civilian world.

It is obviously necessary to have a systematic approach to retention. One aspect of this issue is to understand where problems occur and why personnel opt to leave the Service prematurely. The military psychology section of the Command Scientific Support Branch at Headquarters, RAF Personnel and Training Command undertakes a number of longitudinal attitude and opinion surveys which contain questions relating to why individuals choose to stay in or to leave the RAF. The main surveys containing these type of questions are:

- the RAF Continuous General Attitude Survey - started in 1988 and sent to 8000 personnel per year who at the time of being surveyed will not be leaving the RAF in the forthcoming twelve months;
- the RAF Families Survey - started in 1996 and sent to 4000 spouses of serving personnel per year;
- the RAF Officers Leavers Survey - started in 1996 and sent to all officers who elect to leave the RAF prematurely, or at a specific option point;
- the Airmen and Airmen Aircrew Leavers Survey - started in 1998 and sent to all airmen/airmen aircrew who choose to leave the Service prematurely, or at the end of their engagement;
- the Personnel Management Agency Feedback Survey - started in 1998 and sent to a representative sample of 10% of officers and 5% of airmen per year.

From these surveys, the factors which seem to influence strongly an individual's decision to remain in or to leave the Service can be grouped into 4 sets as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 -Types of Factor Influencing Retention

Influence towards	Type of Factor	Related to
Remaining in the Service	•Pull-in'	Advantages of remaining in
	'Push-in'	Disadvantages of leaving
Leaving the Service	'Pull-out'	Advantages of leaving
	'Push-out'	Disadvantages of remaining in

Turning first to factors that influence personnel to remain in the Service, the main 'pull in' factors, that is those that are seen as advantages to remaining in the RAF, are:

- with the exception of junior airmen, 'financial reasons' ie pay, allowances etc;
- security ie long term contract of employment;
- challenging work, responsibility and leadership;
- enjoyment of Service life, emotional attachment to the Service and Service camaraderie;
- for junior airmen only, the opportunity for educational/professional development and the opportunity for travel;
- for aircrew, the opportunity to fly.

It should be noted that junior airmen tend, in general, to perceive influential 'pull-in' factors to be less achievable than do their seniors in rank, ie Senior Non-Commissioned Officers and Officers.

Few 'push-in' factors, (that is those that are seen as disadvantages to leaving such as 'inability to get appropriate civilian job') were considered to be influential reasons for either airmen or officers to remain in the RAF. Junior airmen, unlike all the other rank groups, considered financial aspects to be a 'push-in' factor. The surveys' results suggested that some members of this group may be remaining in the Service because they perceive that they would be worse off financially if they left.

Looking now at the factors that influence personnel to leave the RAF, the main 'push out' factors, that is those that are seen as disadvantages to remaining in the Service, are:

- perceived promotion prospects and the promotion system, (it should be noted that the influence of these issues decreases with increasing rank);
- with the exception of junior airmen, changes to Service life and the current state/future of the RAF;
- family related reasons, such as stability, separation from family and spouses' careers.

The most influential 'pull out' factors (that is those that are seen as advantages to leaving) are employment opportunities and career prospects in the civilian world.

In general, therefore, from the data that we have gathered so far the factors that influence retention appear to fall into two main groups. First are those which the RAF needs to continue to focus upon in its Strategy for People. These include the following aspects:

- the ongoing provision of rewarding and well managed career structures offering opportunities for advancement;
- rates of pay for all ranks which are seen as comparable with broadly equivalent civilian occupations (through the independent pay review process);
- family stability (this needs to remain a high profile issue to be addressed pro-actively).

Second are the factors for which well designed internal public relations and communications programmes would play an important part in improving retention. Such programmes will necessarily include elements of 'listening' to personnel as well as 'informing' them. These programmes could address areas of potential discontent through ensuring that individuals' expectations are realistic; that the RAF is precise about what it offers and what it expects; and that there are no mismatches between what the RAF thinks it has delivered and what individuals feel that they have received. One example relates to the promotion and assessment systems. As previously stated, past data has suggested that the promotion system was not perceived to be fair by some personnel. All members of the RAF consider it highly important that promotion should be on the basis of ability. The promotion and assessment systems have recently been subject to radical revision, and there are indications that the changes

are widely regarded to be improvements. It is, therefore, important that the impetus is maintained by continuing to monitor and improve the systems and by publicising and fostering the favourable changes in opinions.

This, then, is a brief overview of the work in which we as military psychologists have been involved to help inform and monitor the RAF's retention strategy. Clearly, lack of time precludes further discussion of specific detailed issues such as differences in attitudes between rank and Branch/Trade groups. In depth analyses of actual and potential reasons for staying/leaving and our attempts to combine these with other relevant information cannot be covered.

For the future, research continues into when and why retention problems occur, and into methods of modelling and predicting retention, with the aim of formulating recommendations for its systematic management.